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Brian R Naranjo 01/11/2002 11:58:19 AM From DB/Inbox: Brian R Naranjo

Cable Text:

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TELEGRAM

January 10, 2002

To: SECSTATE WASHDC - ROUTINE
Action: WHA
From: AMEMBASSY CARACAS (CARACAS 49 - ROUTINE)
TAGS: PREL, KPAO, VE
Captions: None
Subject: PRESS PLAY: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO NEWSPAPER AND -
FALLOUT OF 1/7 DEMONSTRATION
Ref: CARACAS 00026

1. (U) SUMMARY: Ambassador visited the newspaper "El Nacional" 1/8 in the wake of the demonstration in front of the newspaper's offices by Chavez supporters the evening of 1/7. She discussed the recent events with newspaper owner Miguel Enrique Otero and five senior editors. Upon leaving she responded to questions from El Nacional and radio and TV reporters. Her visit, the Department Spokesman's statement, and widespread criticism of the demonstration from both within and without Venezuela dominate the press. End summary.
2. (U) In her remarks the Ambassador stressed the right to demonstrate peacefully and the right and duty of the media to inform without intimidation. She also emphasized the commitments made during the Summits of the Americas in support of press freedom. She explained that her visit was meant to show solidarity with the media, support for freedom of expression, and concern over any efforts to intimidate. Asked if she believed President Chavez was responsible for the demonstration, the Ambassador responded, "I think Venezuelans can judge for themselves what motivated these people [the demonstrators]."
3. (U) The Ambassador's visit, together with the Department's statement and the expressions of support and concern from international organizations such as the Inter-American Press Association, Reporters without Frontiers, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the OAS, and the Group of [Latin] American Newspapers (GDA), dominated all Venezuelan media coverage 1/9. Similar statements by Venezuelan groups such as the Venezuelan Press Association, the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference and Fedecamaras also received prominent coverage. El Nacional itself dedicated its entire front page and nine additional complete pages to the matter. Every major Venezuelan daily and all major radio and television broadcasts - with the exception of state-run Venpress and Channel 8 - gave the El Nacional incident and fallout highest-prominence coverage.
4. (U) (SBU) During the conversation, Otero was visibly angry with the government and especially with Defense Minister Rangel, whom he accused of lying about the actions of the National Guard (GN) during the demonstration. Otero insisted that, contrary to Rangel's statements, at no time did Otero request the GN presence, since he believed Metropolitan Police (PM) protection was sufficient. Otero said that the GN, far from providing additional protection for the newspaper and its employees, in fact protected the demonstrators and allowed the demonstration to continue much longer

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than had the PM responded alone.

5. (U) (SBU) Otero said that many of the demonstrators, roughly half, are apparently on the payroll of Libertador borough mayor Freddy Bernal, a fervent MVR Taliban. Asked why the government would organize an activity that appeared decidedly unhelpful to its public image, Otero agreed that it seems senseless but noted that, to the Taliban faction, it might appear otherwise. Otero expressed concern that the incident forebodes the much-discussed "radicalization" of the revolution and said he expects additional attacks against other media to come soon.

6. (SBU) For months Otero, a close friend to Rangel and other Gov figures, has been one of the few Venezuelan media figures to publicly maintain that "freedom of expression is not under threat in Venezuela," and that "there has never been more more press freedom than what we enjoy now." During the meeting with the Ambassador, Otero - for the first time to EmbOff knowledge - admitted that the Chavez government has tried to pressure and intimidate the media. Perhaps reflecting the newspapers' directors' shift in perception, one editor, formerly very close to Chavez, opined that the president is now "totally obsessed" with El Nacional and Otero, "much more so" than with other media. (Comment: Nope. The sense of betrayal may be greater in the case

of El Nacional, once a dependably sympathetic voice for the government, but the hatred focused against Globovision and El Universal is even deeper and more intense. End comment.)

7. (U) Otero's still-palpable anger over the demonstration is reflected in El Nacional's 1/9 editorial (apparently written by Otero himself, which is not common). Titled "The one mainly responsible," the editorial begins, "The aggression suffered by this newspaper on Monday evening (1/7) is the clearest and firmest sign of the authoritarianism of this government, which has no shame in appealing to mobs to try to intimidate the media." The editorial closes, "The time has come for the Armed Forces, and especially the National Guard, to ask themselves if their role in society consists in repressing and threatening President Chavez's critics and protecting the mobs trained to intimidate the media. Or if their place in Venezuelan democracy is to guarantee the full vigor of everyone's freedoms."

HRINAK

Additional Addressees:

None

cc:

AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
AMEMBASSY LIMA
AMEMBASSY QUITO
AMEMBASSY LA PAZ

Distribution:

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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: PRESS PLAY: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO NEWSPAPER AND
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End Cable Text

Brian R Naranjo 01/11/2002 11:59:19 AM From DB/Inbox: Brian R Naranjo

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